



Patronal Festival
Sunday 13 November 2011, 6.30pm

Where time leaps up and strikes eternity

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Readings: 1 John 1.1-4; Luke 22.7-19

Communities have stories, stories which define them, give them their sense of identity and vision for the future. The community will often return to that story, retell it or re-enact it for a new context. It becomes a foundational revelation of the community, not something which merely holds it in the past but gives life and meaning to its present and future. St Martin-in-the-Fields has an incredibly powerful sense of its story; a story which gives us a sense of who we are and what we are called to be. These stories are very familiar to all of us. The first story is written for us by Severus, and it tells of a Roman soldier called Martin. One day, during a particularly severe winter, so extreme that many of the populace were dying from cold, Martin was on duty. He was dressed in his soldier's uniform and armed. He met in the gateway of the city of Amiens a poor man who was destitute of clothes, and begging for help. All passed by that poor man without acknowledging his presence. But when Martin saw that man he questioned himself what to do. He had nothing left save his cloak for he had already given his other clothes to the destitute. Unsheathing his sword he cut the cloak in two, giving half to the beggar, wrapping the remaining half around himself, much to the derision and laughter of those who saw his action. The following night when Martin was sleeping he had a vision of Christ dressed in a the part of his cloak with which he had clothed the poor man and he heard Jesus speaking to him "Martin, you have clothed me with your robe – for in so much as you have done this for the least of my brothers and sisters you have done it for me." How integral that story has become to the life of this church, never ceasing to call us to find Christ in one another and on the edge.

Another story which forms our community and which links with the first one is the story that Roger Shaljean read to us: the story of Dick Sheppard and his vision of our church with an open door. Dick Sheppard said 'the church was never dark, it was lighted all day and all night, and often tired bits of humanity swept in and I said to them as they passed "Where are you going?" And they said only one thing: "This is our home. This is where we are going to learn of the love of Jesus Christ. This is the altar of the Lord where all peace lies. This is St Martin's."'

These are the stories which become our shared revelation. We live out of them. Such stories of revelation fill the scriptures: Abraham journeying with his beloved Isaac to the altar of sacrifice. Filled with dread in his obedience to the God he believed would force him to sacrifice the one he loved most. And there on that altar all is transformed; Abraham is given a revelation into the true nature of God who does not demand human sacrifice but a covenant of love, the love which allows him to set his only beloved son free. Or Jacob on his way towards Haran, lying down to sleep and dreaming that he saw a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reaching to the heavens; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! A ladder, like a bridge between God and humanity – a dialogue between heaven and earth. Or the story of Moses keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, coming to the mountain of Horeb and there in front of him seeing a flame blazing from a bush, burning and yet never consumed. Then the words that he should come no closer but should remove his sandals, for the place where he was standing was holy ground: holy ground, the place of disclosure, the place of meeting. In these moments of revelation it is as though the veil of the mystery is torn open and the mystery which is beyond us enters into the midst of our mortal lives. 'How can we sing that majesty?' our offertory hymn asks, how can we express this sense of transcendence and beauty with us here and now? Andrew Motion, in his poem, which

winds its way around the top of our light well, and whose words are the words of tonight's commissioned anthem by Philip Moore, speaks of this mystery, the leap between heaven and earth, earth and heaven.

Now traveller, whose journey passes through
Tall courts of shifting light, and trudging crowds
Continually worn down but always new,

Your stepping inwards from air to earth
Winds round itself to meet the open sky
So vanishing becomes a second birth.

Fare well. Return. Fare well. Return again.
Here home and elsewhere share one mystery.
Here love and conscience sing the same refrain.
Here time leaps up. And strikes eternity.

This sense of time leaping up and striking eternity, and heaven breaking into the ordinary is at the heart of the Christian story. The Gospels show God's kingdom as something beyond us which we move towards, but they also reveal a sense of God's kingdom with us now if only we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear, the senses to touch, and if only our hearts are open. The divine ladder is ever present, linking the above and below, the mortal and the immortal, our here and now with all eternity. There is a movement of love, a to and fro which never ceases, a dialogue which opens up if only we were to give it reverence and space. So often we block out that sense of the divine. We no longer see the miracle. We sometimes convince ourselves that the mystery of our lives can be contained, systematically planned, understood, ordered, managed for our advantage. The curtains are pulled so that we do not see beyond our immediate preoccupations. We watch the computer screen but miss the full moon and the stars in the night. Neon has blocked out the angels, mortal flesh does not know its mortality, it does not know how to keep silent.

Jesus Christ calls us into sacred space. A space where those preoccupations and the distractions are set aside. The Gospel passage tonight tells us the story which becomes the life giving story of the Christian faith, a story which daily we act out in this church and make present in our own lives. It is the story of the Last Supper, and of course leads us into the story of the next three days. Three days which change everything and which continue to spiral through our own lives. Three days of the paschal mystery, passion, death and resurrection. In our Gospel tonight Jesus says to his disciples "Go and prepare". And as they go to prepare a table for him, they realise that it is he who has prepared this table for them. They do not understand, but later they will begin to understand that this table which they prepare is also an altar – it is the place of transformation. At this table Jesus takes the simple gifts of bread and wine, simple staples of life, and in his hands breaks these gifts open so that those who come to this table are invited to share in the very life of God offered for each one of them, and beyond them, offered for the world.

Two weeks ago I stayed up late into the night to watch this new altar, wrapped and protected, being moved step by step into this church, all 2.7 Tonnes of it, moved in with great skill. A huge piece of Travertine marble from Italy, huge in scale and weight, far bigger than any of us, and yet needing attention and infinite care. As though the life of this stone and timber were in the artist's hands. It was not just a piece of stone that held us, it was something beyond the stone, it was a sense of awe, that this altar was something much greater and beyond all of us. Shirazeh Houshiary and Pip Horne have not created something, rather their great creative skill has been to reveal something – to slice through the stone, to open up the miracle of its creation. They have let the stone and the oak speak for itself. As we tore the packaging away and saw its simplicity and beauty, it was as though we were hushed and drawn into the inscape – the Creator God beyond the stone. The thousands of

years of its creation: elemental, powerful and silent... a story which had begun millions of years before and will continue long after we are gone. We stood before it silent – seeing the pattern and sedimentary layers of this stone like a figure lying prostrate – something timeless yet vulnerable, mortal too like bone, human bone that can be worn away. The gashes in the stone appeared almost to be like wounds. But it is not dead stone. There is a luminosity, a light within, the story of the tomb is also the story where the stone has rolled away. None of us wanted to go home that night, or cover up the stone again. For how many hundred years will this altar still be telling its story? As we went away we took the altar away with us, the space in our hearts for resurrection to come.

As we approach this altar we enter again the paschal mystery. The place of darkness and death has become the place of revelation and light. Come to this altar with open hands and heart. Come like Moses in the knowledge that this is holy ground. As you hold out your hands at this altar, remember tonight that Christ is inviting you to share his very life. You are his beloved. You are the one in whom he delights. Tonight, each one of us is called to share his resurrection. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. This Christ story is the story which includes the story of St Martin, the story of Dick Sheppard, and all our stories too. This, in the words of Dick Sheppard is where we are going to learn of the love of Jesus Christ. This is the altar of the Lord, where all peace lies. The stone is broken open, the tomb is flooded with light, the wounds become signs of resurrection and hope, and the stone which the builders rejected becomes the cornerstone, the foundation upon which we build our lives. Come to this altar. It is the living God who invites you to meet him here and enter into the story of his love for you.